

THE ABSENCE OF GOD

Doubt

Mark 9:14-24; Matthew 27:45-46

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April 9, 2017

LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-absence-of-god-doubt/>

I hold in my hand a small rock from our Ash Wednesday service. We encouraged everyone to take one, as a reminder all through this season—what might the inside of a tomb feel like? Cold, hard, uncaring. A fitting symbol of our theme, the absence of God. Let's think about the journey we have shared this Lenten season, exploring "The Absence of God"—in suffering and unanswered prayer, evil and injustice, natural disasters, illness, and loss. Today's topic is all-encompassing, in that we take all of those and put them in a basket. Doubt covers them all.

It's as if the Mark text wants to introduce us to three kinds of doubt. There is the doubt of the scribes (v. 14), which is an arrogant resistance, which has made up its mind ahead of time against God. This kind of doubt insists on staying in control and will not yield. Second, there is the doubt of the disciples, who cannot perform this miracle. It's the doubt of not paying attention, not making the connection of how God can work in new situations. Plain and simple? Spiritual dullness. The duh factor. But the third kind of doubt mentioned in our text is the one we've been dealing with in this sermon series—it is searching doubt which can lead to searching faith, the kind in which we are going through the worst crisis of our lives and we are out of options, and we believe, but we don't believe..." I believe; help my unbelief." It is open and capable of growth, but also honest about its doubt.

Paul Elie once said that belief and unbelief trade places in our hearts like night watchmen changing shifts. So here's the key. We don't need to be ashamed of doubt. It is a part of growing faith. You remember after Mother Teresa died, we were shocked to learn about her doubts and her lack of faith. It existed right alongside her great faith. We need to remember: Faith does not make us all-knowing; it connects us to the God who is all-knowing. Faith does not make us all-powerful; it connects us to the God who is all-powerful. And sometimes, just being in a relationship with that kind of God has to be enough.

And where do we go in scripture for a picture of the greatest faith struggle? Matthew 27:45-46, our other text. Matthew records the phenomenon. Darkness covered the land from noon until 3:00pm. Darkness. What a metaphor for what Jesus was going through. You've heard me quote Henri Nouwen many times. He was a prolific author and pastor. His writings drew many people close to the Lord. But he once wrote that he didn't feel much of anything when he prayed. He felt as if his prayers were as dead as rocks. He said the word that came to mind was darkness! [*Sabbatical Journey*, p. 5].

One of my favorite American writers is Flannery O'Connor. She once wrote, "You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty" [*The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, pp. 353-354]. By the way, she also wrote that by the time we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead!

Let's face it. A part of faith is certainty but a part of faith is also spiritual longing. Think about it. Quarreling with God at least means you are in a relationship with God! You don't really quarrel with strangers, do you? And there is more good news: God loves us in our doubts.

One new thought that has opened up to me in this sermon series is that we not only have faith IN Jesus; we also have the faith OF Jesus. We participate in Jesus' faith in the Father. So when we go through times of darkness, when we doubt, there is Jesus, in the midst of our imperfect faith, standing before the Father on our behalf (scripture says he is always making intercessions for us—Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). And Jesus can say, "I know exactly what you are going through. Let me tell you about a dark Friday afternoon many years ago."

Brian McLaren tells about a friend who was struggling with his faith. The friend emailed and said, "I was always afraid to 'go there,' afraid to admit real questions about God. But now that he is dealing with them, admitting them, it's still hard." But he said, "instead of falling away from God, I feel that I'm falling into God as never before." [*The Church on the Other Side*, p. 201]. Falling into God. Not a bad place to be.